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SUBJECT: Media Reaction, Digital Duel (in Iran)

#### Digital Duel

On June 25, 2009, center-right daily O Globo writes, "In spite of the Iranian government's best efforts to conceal the dimension of the protests going on in that country, a 40-second video shot by cellular phone transformed Neda Agha-Soltan into the icon of the 'Green Revolution.' The person who bypassed the digital firewalls was a blogger who identified himself only as 'Hamid.' A friend of his made the video of Neda's agony, as she was shot by Basij militia. Hamid sent the video to CNN, BBC, YouTube and the social networking site Facebook. Quickly, the youth's death shocked the world.

An arsenal of new electronic resources makes life more difficult for authoritarian regimes. But the same technology that helps those who struggle for democracy is also available for those who wish to uphold absolutist theocracies, such as that of Tehran, and almighty political parties, such as the one in Beijing. The Berkman Center at Harvard estimates that there are over thirty governments that control their citizens' access to the web. One of the most obstinate is Iran. According to the Wall Street Journal, the regime makes use of a sophisticated mechanism that allows it to not only block messages, but also to capture information about the people sending the messages, and even alter the content of these messages—a way of planting misinformation. Authoritarian regimes' fight against freedom of expression has evolved along with technology. Before the fall of the Berlin Wall, West German police ripped out television antennas that received channels from East Germany. In 1989, the Iranian ayatollahs themselves declared war on parabolic antennae. China has a battalion of an estimated 60,000 censors to determine what citizens can or cannot access on the internet, aided by software known as the 'The Great Firewall,' a wordplay on 'The Great Wall.' Much of what we know about what happens in Iran is due to technology developed in the USA by members of the spiritual group Falun Gong, who have been persecuted in China since 1999. The software is being passed on to Iranian dissident leaders.

Nicholas Kristof, columnist for the New York Times, summed up the digital battle: 'The equivalent of the Berlin Wall in the 21st century is a cyber-wall, and we can help to tear it down.' One hopes that this will start to happen in Cuba. Obama's good-will package to Cubans included authorization for American businesses to offer cellular, television, and radio services to Cubans. The question to be answered is who will be the most efficient user of these new technologies: movements in support of freedom or supporters of authoritarian regimes?"

MARTINEZ